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ABSTRACT

Although the acts of reading literature and writing are closely linked, literature study and composition instruction remain distinct pursuits within college English departments. Style seems to be an interest that unifies the two pursuits. The most common view of style equates it with acceptable rhetorical and grammatical conventions. A second view divides style into hierarchical levels of formal, informal, and colloquial, depending on the audience. Both views hold that style is separable from content. A third view defines style as a choice of alternative language structures. One theorist argues that if form and content are indivisible, literary analysis may allow no alternative phrasing, but that composition teachers must be guided in stylistic matters by the dualist theory of choice, so students will be aware of the existence of different ways to say the same thing. But rather than seeking an equivalent phrase to say the same thing, the stylist seeks the unique phrase that precisely captures the expressive effect intended. Thus, effect or audience response plays a role in style. An "ideal" reader is one who is aware of the variety of potential effects of a prose passage. Since such ideal reading requires a text of ideal writing, a view of prose style as choice for effect as well as meaning is as consequential to composition as readability, clarity, and appropriateness. (HTH)

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The Ideal Reader and the Ideal Writer: Affective Stylistics and the Writing Process

Leonora Woodman

Apart from the commonplace, and largely intuitive, notion that somehow the act of reading literature and the act of writing are closely linked, the study of literature and the teaching of composition remain distinct pursuits within English Departments. It is possible, of course, to argue that synthesis will prove elusive until Departments of English redefine their subject matter to include a far broader spectrum of written discourse than has hitherto been admitted under the aegis of literary studies; and, indeed, Frank D'Angelo has argued that the preoccupation of literature scholars with "elite verbal artifacts"[1] must yield to a more catholic view of discourse before any meaningful unity can take place. The argument has considerable merit, if only because it asks us to review some of our traditional assumptions. But renovative measures, especially when they involve possible curriculum change, have a way of faltering when faced with habitual modes of thought and practice. An alternative, it seems to me, is to begin more modestly by probing an area of common interest. By so proceeding, we may perhaps find that rapprochement bears a familiar face, less alien than our hitherto divided interests would seem to suggest.

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I have in mind our overlapping interest in the study of style, however variously this polysemous term has been construed by the literary critic and the rhetorician. A useful introduction to one theory, influential in modern poetics, is offered by Wallace Stevens who, speaking of the mind's will to create "aesthetic projections," chief of which were the gods, has this to say of style:

> Style is not something applied. It is something inherent, something that permeates. It is of the nature of that in which it is found, whether the poem, the manner of a god, the bearing of a man. It is not a dress. It may be said to be a voice that is inevitable. A man has no choice about his style.[2]

The observation insists on an organic view of style reminiscent (if we focus on what Stevens says of the poem) of the theories set forth by the New Critics, chiefly in relation to poetry. I note this not to prepare for an excursus on influence or to trace the relationship of theory and practice in Stevens' work--properly concerns of the literary critic--but to suggest that the content of the passage is especially resonant for the reader who brings to the text a previously acquired literary competence. So equipped, he is prepared to make the inference that would demonstrate Stevens' indebtedness to a critical theory current in his time. It is not likely,

however, that he will consider the passage as itself an instance of the proposition it sets forth, or, phrased another way, as a verbal construct that echoes in its formal elements the unity of form and content it argues for thematically. After all, Stevens arranges his ideas in prose--and discursive prose at that--exempt, as many would have it, from the special expressive force we customarily attribute to the language of poetry. As such, it seems futile to expect the coincidence of linguistic traits and content elements. The informed reader might, to be sure, characterize the style as clear or readable--descriptions that testify to its rhetorical effectiveness--or he might describe it as plain or informal to designate its linguistic register, or, if he is given to more impressionistic responses, he might use epithets such as taut or limpid or brusque. Whatever stylistic markers he uses, however, he is not likely to talk about an organic style, a description customarily reserved for literary discourse that aims at aesthetic effect.

And yet, to rely on traditional descriptions of style in this instance is to scant the delicate interdependence of thought and language in Stevens' seemingly transparent prose. Note, for example, that Stevens' statements are for the most part governed by the structural constraints of Aristotelian definition: the main clause announces the coordinate terms required of definition, while the relative clause carries

the task of differentiation. Moreover, like all such definitions, these, too, pose equations between two classes joined grammatically by the copula. The convention which, it seems reasonable to assume, Stevens expects his readers to share, raises the expectation that the class named in the predicate will not only be equivalent to the subject or the thing to be defined but will, in some fashion, locate it--connect it to the genus to which it belongs. Yet Stevens begins by refusing location; where the convention requires accretion, Stevens chooses divestment, stripping his term of all limiting constraints. Style, he writes, is indeterminate, a "something" without distinction and attribute. The logic of convention yields thus to the disjunction of paradox; style, it would appear, is a "something" which in fact is a nothing, lacking the precision of definitive form. The equation is no doubt idiosyncratic. But for good reason. For by refusing to grant style a measure of shape and form as convention requires; indeed, by nullifying the very term he sets out to define, Stevens treats convention as itself a violation of the stylistic monism for which he subsequently argues. At the same time, a convention which disallows a commitment tc tense carries the sense of the static and timeless, so that when, in this instance, it is iterated in reductive clauses, the subject which is denied divisible form simultaneously assumes the solidity of immutable form. In effect, the structure of definition, as Stevens uses it, takes on the quality of metaphor, tacitly declaring in its very shape that style endures--that, indeed, it is inevitable, as Stevens overtly affirms. By this subtle blending of thought and form, the shape of utterance becomes expressive, serving not merely as the medium of thought but as its very substance, indivisible from the propositional elements it sets forth.

The organic model of style which Stevens urges and which, if I am correct, he illustrates in the very texture of his prose, is of course familiar to sophisticated readers of poetry, accustomed to regarding the sound, rhythm, grammar, and diction of poetic language as itself expressive of poetic idea. Only occasionally, however, does it arise in the criticism and teaching of the discursive essay, traditionally considered the domain of the composition specialist. To be sure, those of us who teach composition are not indifferent to matters of style, but we tend to assign to the concept meanings different from the one I have just outlined. The term style is of course notoriously protean, but, in the main, the meanings on which we tend to rely group themselves into three. Perhaps the most common, as Monroe Beardsley once pointed out,[3] is the tendency to regard style normatively, that is, to equate it with acceptable rhetorical and grammatical conventions, such as a decent respect for the rules of grammar and syntax, a preference for the active over the passive voice, for sufficient variation in sentence patterns, for verbal rather than nominal constructions, and matters of like kind. Another common view of style descends from the classical tradition of decorum, according to which style was separable into hierarchical levels such as grand, middle, and plain, and arranged as a kind of inventory of tropes and figures from which the rhetor might choose, depending on rhetorical occasion. While the hierarchy of such

typologies has largely disappeared, the tradition survives in current genre taxonomies, which ascribe to each category of discourse an appropriate style;[4] as well as in classifications of linguistic register, which carry stylistic rubrics such as formal, informal, and colloquial (defined chiefly by diction and syntax) to designate discourse types aimed at specified audiences. Both views suppose of course that style is isolable from content--the first by reifying formal elements, abstracting them, as it were, from ideational constraints, the second by assuming that content exists prior to form, that, indeed, form follows only as the writer acknowledges the stylistic imperatives dictated by genre and audience.

Finally, there is the widespread view of style as choice.[5] Curiously, this view is held equally by monists like Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks, who affirm that style is "the poet's manner of choosing, ordering, and arranging his words,"[6] and by a dualist like Richard Ohmann, who, it is said, sees the "concept of style as a writer's conscious or subconscious choices among alternatives offered by a language for the expression of thought and feeling."[7] It would seem on the surface that choice may be allowed both camps; after all, common sense tells us that the process of composing entails struggling with linguistic possibility, or at least with alternative

language structures the writer can command. But such a tolerant view a confirmed dualist like Louis Milic will not entertain. For if, Milic argues, taking as his model the monism of Benedetto Croce, form and content are indivisible, there exists no possibility of alternative phrasing, since "every possible change in the arrangement of the same set of words represents a different meaning."[8] It follows, then, that the writer has no choice because only one verbal structure corresponds to the meaning he intends. Hence, while Milic concedes that literary analysis may require a monistic theory of style, he advises that the teacher of composition must be guided in stylistic matters by a theory of rhetorical dualism, for only then will students be aware of "the existence of alternatives, of different ways of saying the same thing."[9] The distinction is echoed by E. D. Hirsch:

> The study of style in literature is a study of the fusion of form with content. But learning how to write implies just the opposite assumption; it assumes the separation of linguistic form and content. Learning the craft of prose is learning to write the same meaning in a different and more effective way.[10]

As Ruth Miller and Mary Taylor have recently pointed out, the difficulty with such a formulation is that it separates the written product from the writing process, misperceiving "differences in stages of production . . . as differences

in essence."[11] By this questionable logic, the literary object, made to exhibit the fusion of form and content, is considered identical to the dynamic process by which it was formed, so that conception and execution would appear to occur simultaneously, like Minerva issuing fully formed from the head of Jove. Gone from this model is the substantial evidence that many writers do, indeed, engage in linguistic experimentation in search of what Joseph Conrad once called "the perfect blending of form and substance." If commonsense did not tell us otherwise, we need only glance at the worksheets of the literary artist to discover that final unity is gained only after painstaking emendation--the result not of the absence of choice but of the dilemma of choice. But choice differently conceived. For rather than seeking an equivalent phrase that would express the same thing, the literary stylist seeks the unique or just phrase--the phrase, in short, that precisely captures the expressive effect he intends. Choice in this scheme carries the weight of aesthetic judgment; it is not egalitarian but hierarchical.

It may be that a description of stylistic monism would be better served by widening the narrow focus on meaning to allow the inclusion of effect--a concept that directs attention to the reader or audience and is hence of rhetorical interest. Such a shift in emphasis may, perhaps, help us to recognize some of the assumptions and strategies shared by the literary critic and the composition specialist. Speaking of fiction, for example,

Wayne Booth characterizes the process of molding reader response as the writer's effort "to impose his fictional world upon the reader" through a variety of "rhetorical appeals."[12] Equally, Brooks and Warren speak of a poem "as a piece of writing which gives us a certain effect in which, we discover, the 'poetry' inheres "(authors' emphasis).[13] And recent rhetorical theory suggests that the audience response model not only provides "a coherent framework for instruction" in composition but allows for the "integrated perspective" which would unify "the study of literature and the teaching of writing."[14]

If, indeed, a theory of audience response can serve to unify poetics and rhetoric, a possibly useful link is the recent tendency in literary criticism to shift the center of interest from text to reader, or, more precisely, to regard the text less as a static and autonomous object than as a transactive event requiring for its completion the active participation of an audience or reader. This interest in the relationship between reader and text is known as reader-response theory, a somewhat broad rubric that includes in its various formulations Norman Holland's transactive theory, David Bleich's subjective criticism, Wolfgang Iser's phenomenological approach, and the early criticism of Stanley Fish, which he has called "affective stylistics." Fish's work is of special interest to the composition specialist, for unlike the more psychologically oriented reader response critics who emphasize the private, subjective strategies

readers use to interpret texts, Fish supposes that interpretation is controlled by public, and shared, interpretive strategies. Consequently, he holds that reader interpretation and authorial intention are closely allied:

> To construct the profile of the informed or at-home reader is at the same time to characterize the author's intention and vice versa, because to do either is to specify the contemporary conditions of utterance, to identify, by becoming a member of, a community made up of those who share interpretive strategies.[15]

This fundamental assumption of a coincidence between authorial "intention" and reader "understanding" informs Fish's related emphasis on the rhetorical nature of discourse; for in Fish's view, the text is not merely a "container from which a reader extracts a message" but a strategy or "action made upon a reader"[16] in order to produce a particular effect. By this standard, the proper question to ask of a text is not What does it mean? but What does it do? by which Fish means What intellectual and emotional responses does it call forth? To answer this question adequately, Fish maintains, requires that we discard our traditional view of the text as a static and isolated entity, a "thing-in-itself," and regard it instead as an "event, something that happens to, and with the participation of, the reader."[17]

To answer the objection that such a view encourages impressionism and the consequent danger of mistaking authorial

intention, Fish proposes an hierarchical model of reading, according to which the best or "ideal" reader is one who "is sufficiently experienced as a reader to have internalized the properties of literary discourse."[18] Such an informed reader, moreover, possesses a "controlled subjectivity," that is, in his transaction with the text he eschews that which is "personal and idiosyncratic" in order that he may make his "mind the repository of the (potential) responses a given text might call out."[19] In short, while Fish acknowledges that the concept of "literature in the reader" is inherently self-reflexive, he attempts to maintain the integrity of authorial intention by limiting the range of possible response.

According to Fish, the transactive enterprise between reader and text is a developing one, that is, instead of responding to the whole utterance, the reader is required to respond to "the words as they succeed one another in time" (Fish's emphasis), in the process forcing analysis by asking "What does this word, phrase, sentence, paragraph . . . do?" [20] The method is no doubt artificial, but, Fish maintains, it not only encourages a close attention to language but requires the reader to acknowledge his developing response in terms of the author's linguistic and rhetorical strategies, which Fish considers indivisible from the meaning set forth. But, and this is crucial, Fish distinguishes between informational meaning--the message itself--and experiential meaning--the effect of the message, insisting that the first is subsumed by the second:

> . . . the information an utterance gives, its message, is a constituent of, but certainly not to be identified with, its meaning. It is the experience of an utterance--all of it and not anything that could be said about it, including anything I could say--that is its meaning.[21]

A brief example of Fish's method of reading may, perhaps, clarify the distinction. Here is a sentence written by Walter Pater that Fish uses as illustration:

> This at least of flame-like, our life has, that it is but the concurrence, renewed from moment to moment, of forces parting sooner or later on their ways.

The paraphrasable point of the sentence seems to be the instability of human experience; but such a bare formulation, Fish maintains, ignores a syntactic pattern which "deliberately frustrates the reader's natural desire to organize the particulars it offers."[22] As evidence, Fish points to the position of the verbal element "renewed from moment to moment," which interrupts the normal order of the noun ("congruence") and its qualifier ("of forces"). Had Pater followed the customary sequence, Fish explains, he would have allowed the "formation of a physical image which has a spatial reality."[23] But by so inserting the verbal element in a deviant position, he deliberately seeks to disorient the reader:

> Before the reader can respond full to 'concurrence,' 'renewed' stops him by making the temporal status of the motion unclear. Has the concurrence already taken place? Is it taking place now? Although 'from moment to moment' answers these questions, it does so at the expense of the assumptions behind them; the phrase leaves no time for anything so formal and chartable as a 'process.' For 'a moment,' at 'of forces,' there is a coming together; but in the next moment, the moment when the reader takes in 'parting,' they separate. Or do they? 'sooner or later' upsets this new attempt to find pattern and direction in 'our life' and the reader is once more disoriented, spatially and temporally. The final deterrent to order is the plural 'ways,' which prevents the mind's eye from travelling down a single path and insists on the haphazardness and randomness of whatever it is that happens sooner or later.[24]

The result of all this, Fish concludes, is that the psychological instability experienced by the reader in decoding the sentence matches the conception of instability which constitutes the message. And this "mimetic enactment," according to Fish, is the meaning of the sentence.

We need not agree with Fish's specific readings to acknowledge the stylistic self-consciousness his method encourages. Consider, for example, George Orwell's description of a hanging in the much-anthologized essay of the same name:

> This man was not dying, he was alive just as we are alive. All the organs of his body were working--bowels digesting food, skin renewing itself, nails growing, tissues forming--all toiling away in solemn foolery. His nails would still be growing when he stood on the drop, when he was falling through the air with a tenth-of-a-second to live. His eyes saw the yellow gravel and the grey walls, and his brain still remembered, foresaw, reasoned--even about puddles. He and we were a party of men walking together, seeing, hearing, feeling, understanding the same world; and in two minutes, with a sudden snap, one of us would be gone--one mind less, one world less.[25]

Were we bound by customary methods of describing prose style, we might note the general informality of the passage--its relatively uncomplicated sentences, simple diction, the absence of a technical or specialized vocabulary, even, if we wished to be more precise, the use of concrete images, especially appropriate in a descriptive passage of this

sort. But if we were to read as Fish would have us, an altogether different stylistic account of the passage might emerge.

To begin, Fish's method of questioning might ask us to account for the effect of the adjectival "this" of "This man," when Orwell might have used the indefinite article "the." We might, further, seek the effect of the idiosyncratic use of the comma, which joins the first two clauses, and of the equally idiosyncratic tense shift in the second clause. We might ask if the repetition of the word "alive" affects our perception, or if a phrase like "organs of the body" elicits a different response from "the body's organs." What, we might ask, is the quality of response to the progressive tense "were working" and to the series that follows, all of which employ the present participle? How are we affected by the tense shift to the future conditional, to the continued use of the participle, to the redundancy of "his eyes saw," "his brain remembered"? What is the effect of the rhymed "He and we" of the final sentence, of the repeated use of the present participle, of the spondaic rhythm of "same world," of the alliteration of "sudden snap," of the final stressed monosyllables, "one mind less--one world less"? Our accord may not be total, but if, from this close monitoring of our response, we were to conclude that Orwell means us to experience the victim's fate as our own, we might, perhaps, allow that we are swayed as much by his language as by his thought. We might futher allow that while the propositional

core of the passage is susceptible of alternative phrasing, the rhetorical core is not. Doctrines of synonymity notwithstanding, Orwell's rhetorical appeal is proffered in a style intrinsic to the effect achieved.

To acknowledge that such a method of reading requires as text the extraordinary discourse of an ideal writer is perhaps to specify with more than customary precision the sense of the word "stylist," an approbative term which we commonly use to suggest distinction and excellence. I would like to think that such a view of prose style is as consequential in our teaching of composition as readability, clarity, and appropriateness, our customary ways of measuring the stylistic effectiveness of written discourse. If it is, we may find that the community of interest which has so long eluded literature and composition specialists is more accessible than we had thought.

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NOTES

[1] Frank D'Angelo, "Regaining Our Composure," College Composition and Communication, 31 (December 1980), 425.

[2] Wallace Stevens, Opus Posthumous, ed. Samuel French Morse (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p. 210.

[3] Monroe Beardsley, "Style and Good Style," in Contemporary Essays on Style, ed. Glen A. Love and Michael Payne (Glenview: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1969), p. 9.

[4] See James L. Kinneavy, A Theory of Discourse (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), pp. 166-194.

[5] See Jane R. Walpole, "Style as Option," College Composition and Communication, 31 (May 1980), pp. 205-212 for a persuasive defense of this view of style in composition teaching.

[6] Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, Understanding Poetry (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1959), p. 694.

[7] Harold C. Martin, ed., Style in Prose Fiction, English Institute Essays, 1958 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), p. xi.

[8] Louis Milic, "The Problem of Style," in Contemporary Rhetoric: A Conceptual Background with Reading, ed. Ross Winterowd (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1975), p. 278.

[9] Louis Milic, "Theories of Style and Their Implications for the Teaching of Composition," in Contemporary Essays on Style, ed. Glen A. Love and Michael Payne, p. 14. In a later essay,

Milic distinguishes between rhetorical choice, which represents "the realization of artistic intentions," and stylistic option, which reveals the writer's habitual uses of lexicon and syntax. "Rhetorical Choice and Stylistic Option," in Literary Style: A Symposium, ed. Seymour Chatman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 77-88. The distinction appears to modify Milic's earlier view that choice is a matter of selecting from among equivalent structures.

[10] E. D. Hirsch, The Philosophy of Composition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 141.

[11] Ruth Miller and Mary Taylor, "The Integrative Perspective: An Audience-Response Model for Writing," College English, 41 (November 1979), 266.

[12] Wayne Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. i.

[13] Brooks and Warren, Understanding Poetry, p. xlix. It should be noted that the psychological effect of poetry was considerably limited in New Critical theory by the doctrine of the "affective fallacy," which held that an emphasis on reader response encouraged impressionism and tended to diminish the integrity of the poem as itself "an object of specifically critical judgment." W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, The Verbal Icon (Louisville: The University of Kentucky Press, 1954), p. 21.

[14] Miller and Taylor, pp. 249; 264.

[15] Stanley Fish, "Interpreting the Variorum," Critical Inquiry, 2 (Spring 1976), 476.

[16] Stanley Fish, "Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics," New Literary History, 2 (Autumn 1970), 124.

[17] Ibid., p. 125.

[18] Ibid., p. 145.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid., p. 126.

[21] Ibid., p. 131.

[22] Ibid., p. 135.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid.

[25] George Orwell, Collected Essays (London: Secker & Warburg, 1970), p. 11.